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ABSTRACT

This teacher's packet accompanies the Smithsonian exhibition "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920." The lessons are intended for grades 10-12 but can be adapted for both elementary and middle school students studying expansion of the U.S. frontier. The five lessons in the packet include: (1) "Heroes and Exploration"; (2) "Native Americans and Stereotypes"; (3) "Mining for Gold"; (4) "The Western Environment"; and (5) "How History Is Made: The View from the Artist's Studio." Each lesson is divided into five distinct steps calling on students to observe art from the period and examining the ways of presentation of the subject. The focus is on observational skills, interpretation, and analysis of meanings. Students undertake various projects designed to improve their interpretative skills. Teaching hints are provided, along with suggested works of art to use in the classroom. (EH)

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THE WEST AS AMERICA

A Guide for Teachers

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National Museum of American Art
Smithsonian Institution

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THE WEST AS AMERICA

A Guide for Teachers

National Museum of American Art
Smithsonian Institution

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THE WEST AS AMERICA

To the Teacher

Westward expansion is one of the best-known episodes in American history. During the nineteenth century, many artists depicted the American West in a way that is still often treated as an objective account of national expansion. ***The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920,*** an exhibition at the National Museum of American Art, argues that this art is *not* an objective account of history. Art is not necessarily history; seeing is not necessarily believing. The intention of the exhibition is not to criticize western art, but, on the contrary, to acknowledge the way the art of the West imaginatively *invented* its subjects instead of simply copying them.

The West as America is an exhibition about looking—about learning to interpret images, to see how they create meanings.

The West as America teacher's packet, designed to complement the exhibition, is intended for grades 10 through 12, but the lessons can be adapted to meet the needs of both elementary and middle school students. The lessons may be used as a group or independently, depending on how they relate to your syllabus.

The packet includes five lessons

- ❑ Heroes and Exploration
- ❑ Native Americans and Stereotypes
- ❑ Mining for Gold
- ❑ The Western Environment
- ❑ How History is Made: The View from the Artist's Studio

The overall goals of the packet

I. To help students develop observational skills through the close examination of works of art. How precisely can a work of art be described? How many details, unnoticed at first, can be spotted after a period of sustained observation?

II. To help you and your students develop the ability to interpret works of art. The emphasis is on being able to see how and why works of art create meaning.

III. To help you and your students see how and why contemporary images also create meanings—not only about the West but other topics as well. You and your students will be asked to apply your interpretive skills to images from our time.

Each lesson is divided into five distinct steps

1. ***What Do You See?*** Students describe a work of art as thoroughly and neutrally as they can, noting not only its content but its design as well.
2. ***What Does the Painting Tell You?*** Students discover the theme (or themes) of the work of art, a process that involves interpreting what they see—or, put another way, transforming the image from a literal to a symbolic one.
3. ***What the Painting Does Not Tell You*** Students learn historical information that contradicts the work of art, showing how it does not necessarily tell the whole story.
4. ***Why Was It Painted This Way?*** Students discover outside factors that may have influenced the way the artist chose to paint the image.
5. ***Suggested Exercises*** Students undertake various projects designed to improve their interpretive skills. Typically these projects involve the interpretation of contemporary images whose relevance is suggested by the historical material covered in class.

Teaching Hints

The lessons require that one or two works of art be displayed before the class. Students will need ample time to describe and interpret what they see, and you may find that it will be useful to show the works of art for as long as 15 to 20 minutes.

Class discussion should be free-flowing. You will find that it is one thing for an interpretation to unfold in the pages of a teacher's packet such as this one, but that it is another for students themselves to create interpretations in class. Students will devise interpretations that differ from those offered in the lessons. The interpretations in this packet are not meant to provide a finalized set of meanings—a set of "right" answers— for the images under discussion, but rather to offer several possible meanings among many.

To encourage interpretation you might identify a key theme—these themes are listed in the lesson plans—and ask students how the painting in question expresses that theme.

You might also encourage students to see that paintings work by associating one item with another. Interpretation can be a matter of finding relationships between elements in a painting and then associating these elements with a symbolic meaning. The first three lessons include short lists called "associations" to help you see such meanings.

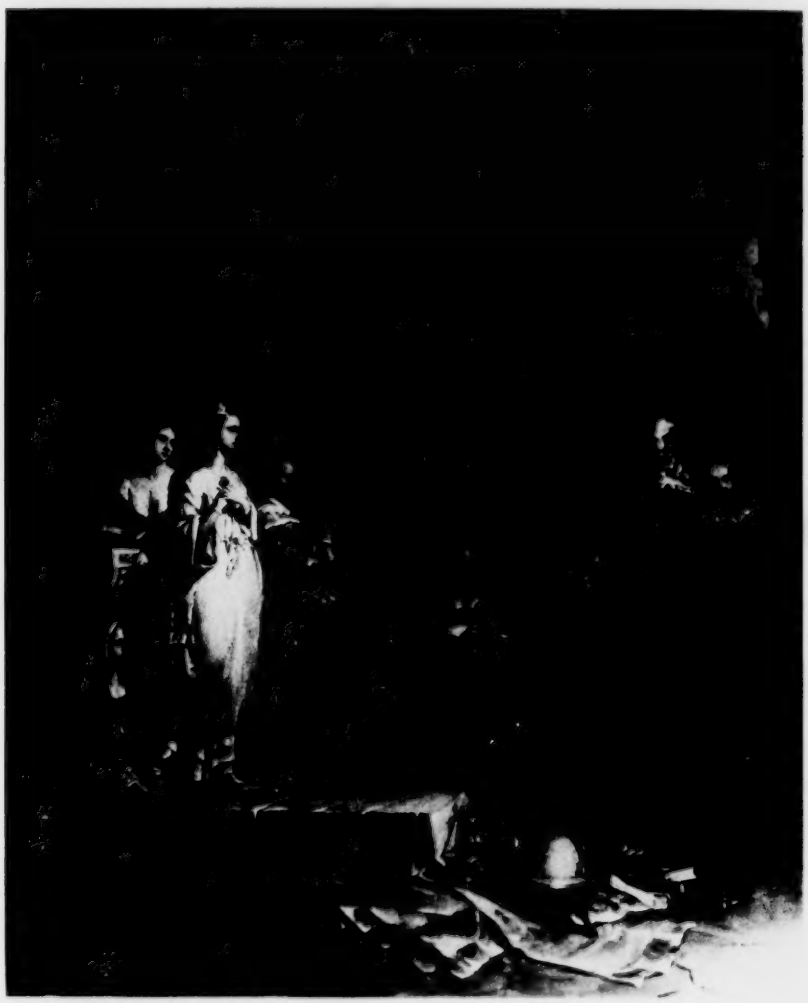
Introduce information where it will encourage class discussion (particularly in steps three and four), but otherwise allow students the pleasure of discovering new interpretations and meanings for themselves.

Lesson 1

HEROES AND EXPLORATION

Goals

1. To show how nineteenth-century images defined territorial expansion as heroic
2. To reveal how contemporary images can glorify or exalt their subject matter



Peter Rothermel
Columbus before the Queen
1842
oil on canvas
62 3/8 x 50 in.

What Do You See?

❑ **Ask students to describe the painting as fully as possible.**

Rothermel's painting shows a man gesturing to a map. At his feet are a globe, another map, and several closed books, including one labeled "Marco Polo." On the left, a woman in white looks at this man while clutching a jeweled necklace with a Christian cross. Two other men, both looking at the first, sit to the right of the woman. Two additional figures stand behind the man with the map. Not easily seen at upper right, a sculpture of a horn-blowing figure is placed atop a column. The painting includes other figures, for example a scribe seated near the middle of the composition. The scene takes place in a dark interior that is lighter on the right.

What Does the Painting Tell You?

❑ **Ask students who the figures in the painting might be; then suggest key themes that students can explore.**

The figure with the globe and maps—emblems of exploration—is Columbus. How do we know what Columbus is doing? The globe placed on top of the map suggests that Columbus is arguing that the earth is round (like the globe) and not flat (like the map). The books suggest that the feats of earlier explorers such as Marco Polo will indeed be "closed books" beside the exploits of Columbus.

Judging by their expressions, the two men on the left side of the painting do not believe Columbus. One of these men is dressed regally: He is Ferdinand, king of Spain. The other man is perhaps a counselor. The woman in white is Queen Isabella. Her stare indicates that she is moved by Columbus's argument. The jeweled cross around her neck recalls the legend that she sold her jewels to finance Columbus's voyage.

KEY THEMES

1. Columbus's voyage as divine mission
2. The triumph of light (truth, Christianity) over darkness (superstition)

Yet Isabella's cross-touching gesture contains another meaning. For her, Columbus's voyage is a divine mission. Other images within the painting reinforce this theme. A glow of light appears behind Columbus, as if emanating from his body, making him into a kind of holy figure. Strong highlights of this light reflect off Columbus's head, Isabella's diadem, and the globe between them, suggesting a holy link between the two figures and the idea of a round world. In fact, the wooden strip arching over the globe suggests a "halo" over this round world. Set apart from the light, the disbelieving Ferdinand and his counselor are literally "in the dark" about Columbus's plans. Finally, the sculpture of the trumpet-blowing figure foreshadows the triumphant call, from atop the mast of Columbus's ship, that land—the New World—has been sighted.

ASSOCIATIONS

Gloom or Dark	Light
King Ferdinand	Columbus
his advisor	Isabella
a flat world	a round world

What the Painting Does Not Tell You

❑ **Share this information with your students.**

Rothermel's painting presents a detailed account of Columbus as hero. Yet it is misleading in many ways. Although the painting may suggest that Isabella sold her jewels to finance his trip, in fact the money came from plunder the Spanish had seized during their wars in Africa. Further, Columbus's voyage was not undertaken for religious reasons—it was not a divine mission—but as a matter of economics. Navigation to the New World meant that the Spanish would be able to open lucrative new trade routes over which they would have control.

The painting also contains several anachronisms (errors in respect to dates or the order of historical events). The male figures (Columbus, for example) wear seventeenth-century costumes. The globe is really a nineteenth-century model.

Why Was It Painted This Way?

❑ **Discuss possible reasons with your students.**

Rothermel made his painting in Philadelphia in 1842. At that time westward expansion was beginning in earnest. Most Americans perceived this exploration as a heroic, even divine quest. For this reason the past was transformed to reflect the values of the present. Columbus became a hero, the first pioneer, instead of a sailor attempting to increase the wealth and territory of Spain.

Emanuel Leutze (LOYT-sa)
Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way
1861
oil on canvas
33 1/4 x 43 3/8 in.

What Do You See?

❑ **Ask students to describe the painting as fully as possible.**

Leutze's painting shows a group of people at the top or near the top of a mountain, from which they see a huge valley and, on the horizon, a sliver of water. The most prominent figure—the man in the coonskin cap—gestures toward the valley while a woman, perhaps his wife, clasps her hands in prayer. Other figures stare into the valley while still others, at lower left, chop down trees. More figures at lower right have not yet glimpsed the sight at the top of the mountain. At middle right, two men lower another figure into a grave (note the cross) while a woman weeps over the body. Finally, around the edge of the painting are depicted various figures and scenes, including a portrait of a man in each of the medallions in the lower corners; a large body of water stretching between the medallions; in the upper left corner, three men looking at a star; at middle right, a man holding a compass and globe.

What Does the Painting Tell You?

❑ **Ask students who the figures might be; suggest key themes that students can explore.**

The figures ascending and stopping on top of the mountain are pioneers. They are shown at a dramatic moment in their overland trek—the moment when the Pacific Ocean (the sliver of water in the distance) has first been spotted.

Leutze's painting contains two main themes. The first is human control over nature. We see it in the pioneers' literal ability to scale a mountain—to surmount a huge natural obstacle—as well as in the figures chopping down the trees. The painting does not claim that this human control has been easy. One figure is being lowered into his grave. Nearby the broken wagon wheel and skeleton of a large animal suggest that earlier pioneers did not make it to the promised land without loss. A figure in the foreground wears a blood-stained bandage around his head, indicating that perhaps a fight with Native Americans has been part of the settlers' journey.

KEY THEMES

1. Human control over nature
2. Westward expansion as divine mission

Leutze's second main theme is the "divine" or "holy" aspect of westward expansion. The cross in the background marks not only the dead man's grave but the sanctity of the westward movement. Together with her child, the praying mother is a frontier Madonna. The golden sky lights up the valley of the promised land below. The number of people and things "pointing" to the valley and Pacific Ocean signifies their special importance. (In addition to the gesture of the coonskin-capped figure, note the pointing finger of the man at left, the pointing gun of the man resting against the rock under the capped figure's extended arm, and also the "pointing" trees at left.) Finally, various religious motifs in the painting's borders (the Three Kings at upper right, for example) reinforce the Christian theme.

ASSOCIATIONS

Left part of picture	Lower right part of picture
light	darkness
rest	toil
family/fertility (mother, father, child)	death

What the Painting Does Not Tell You

❑ **Share this information with your students.**

Leutze's painting depicts westward expansion as a difficult task leading to a heavenly reward represented by the fertile golden valley below. Yet actual pioneers made the overland trek, either by wagon or train, only to discover that the promised Promised Land at the end of their journey was a lonely, inhospitable place. In ***Six Years on the Border; or, Sketches of Frontier Life*** (1883), Mrs. J. B. Rideout describes how her family had left New England for the West because they "had heard of a village on the banks of a beautiful river, surrounded by a rich country fast filling up with intelligent people...." After the hazardous trip overland, the Rideouts arrived at their destination:

> We reached the town of which we had read such glowing accounts before leaving the East...and as I stood in the village which had appeared to my imagination in so many different forms, feeling homesick and discouraged, I looked around and counted the buildings. One blacksmith's shop, one small store, one dwelling-house and two little cabins....

Traveling an average of fifteen miles a day, the pioneers usually took between five and six months to reach Oregon or California. During the journey they faced skirmishes with Native Americans and diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever. Often trapped in the mountains by winter snows (instead of gloriously reaching their summits, as Leutze's image shows), the pioneers often had to slaughter their mules and oxen for food and proceed on foot. Leutze's painting includes a burial, a man with a bandaged head, and other references to the hardships the pioneers actually faced. Yet his image remains a glorifying account of westward migration.

Why Was It Painted This Way?

❑ **Discuss possible reasons with your students.**

By casting westward expansion as a religious mission, Leutze ignored the more material reasons for migrating overland. Instead of a man looking to strike gold or to start over after his eastern farm had failed, Leutze's coonskin-capped figure is shown as a heroic explorer in the tradition of Daniel Boone, William Clark, Columbus, and even the biblical Three Kings.

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

1. THE HERO IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

What makes these images of Columbus and the pioneer heroic? How do the artists make these figures the center of attention? Identify for your students some of the ways that Leutze's painting glorifies its subject:

1. The pioneer is at the center of the X-shaped composition.
2. His arm and head appear dramatically against the sky, making him the focus of our attention.
3. He is placed at the apex of a triangular form, above most of his party.
4. He triumphantly extends his arm outward.

From a magazine or newspaper show an image from contemporary culture that glorifies its subject and ask students how this is achieved. Then, as a homework assignment, ask students to look through magazines and newspapers to find a heroic photograph of a contemporary figure or figures and write a brief analysis of how these images glorify or exalt their subject matter. This emphasis on how images make meaning will solidify students' interpretive skills.

2. CREATE A HEROIC PORTRAIT

As an alternative to written analysis, ask students to draw or create an artistic expression of heroism.

NATIVE AMERICANS AND STEREOTYPES

Goals

1. To define the word "stereotype" and consider the powerful ability of stereotypes to shape opinion
2. To reveal how nineteenth-century painters stereotyped Native Americans as either subhuman savages or "noble red men"
3. To apply the concept of stereotypes by examining images of contemporary people

Theodor Kaufmann
Westward the Star of Empire
1867
oil on canvas
35 1/2 x 55 1/2 in.

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What Do You See?

❑ **Ask students to describe the painting as fully as possible.**

Kaufmann's painting shows a group of Native Americans in the grass or brush at the right side of the train track. In the distance, a concentrated light is visible. The most prominent Native American figure is either pulling a section of track behind him or placing the section across the railroad bed. The horizontal orientation of his body is matched by that of the dark clouds in the sky. Meanwhile, the light in the distance is echoed by the light of the moon. On the left, another Native American who is barely visible moves away from the track to the left.

What Does the Painting Tell You?

❑ **Ask your students what is taking place; suggest a key theme that students can explore.**

The Native Americans have removed sections of the railroad track. The advancing train (indicated by its headlight) will be derailed when it reaches the missing track.

The painting establishes several key contrasts between settlers and Native Americans.

The train is presumably constructed, driven, and ridden in by settlers. It represents the literal "light" of Western civilization. The Native Americans, on the other hand, virtually melt into the darkness alongside the tracks. In the relationship of the most prominent figure to the similarly horizontal clouds, Kaufmann's painting compares Native Americans to a "dark cloud on the horizon."

KEY THEME

The light of civilization versus the darkness, evil, and subhumanity of "savages"

The Native Americans are closely connected to the earth. They slither and skulk. They peep their heads out from the trackside brush like wild animals. The arms of the Native American holding the rail are explicitly snakelike, suggesting that he is literally something of a "snake in the grass." (This snakelike shape is even more emphatic when one follows just the line of white highlight as it proceeds from one of his hands to the other.) The train—the force of civilization—is by contrast aligned with the straight lines of the track and railroad ties.

ASSOCIATIONS

Settlers	Native Americans
train, technology	earth, animals
light	darkness/dark clouds
straight lines	serpentine forms
progress	disruption of progress

What the Painting Does Not Tell You

❑ **Share this information with your students.**

Kaufmann made his painting in 1867 when the construction of the first transcontinental railroad was well under way. (The railroad was completed in 1869.) As crews built the railroad, they did in fact face attacks from groups of Cheyenne and Sioux. In this sense Kaufmann's painting has a basis in real events.

Yet Kaufmann's painting polemically casts the goodness of Western civilization (progress and light) against the disruptive evil of the Native Americans (snakelike barbarians emerging from the darkness). The Native Americans are the villains, yet it was their ancestral land across which the railroad was built. In this sense it is the train itself, and not the Native Americans, that intrudes.

Why Was It Painted This Way?

❑ **Discuss possible reasons with your students.**

As Americans moved westward, various Native American cultures contested their desire to march across and settle on the land. The decimation of these cultures was rationalized when artists such as Kaufmann represented Native Americans as subhuman brutes. Violence to Native American cultures thus became morally defensible because it was not perceived as violence to other human beings. It was seen instead as the necessary eradication of a "lower" form of life that could disrupt, or "derail," the rightful "progress" of civilization.

Charles Bird King
Young Omahaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and Pawnees
1822
oil on canvas
36 1/8 x 28 in.

What Do You See?

❑ **Ask your students to describe the painting as fully as possible.**

King's painting represents five Native Americans from the waist up. The most prominent figure, second from the left, wears a fur robe over his left shoulder and extending down under his right arm. A spear points to his throat. He wears beads, as do the figures flanking him. He also wears a medal bearing the likeness of a white man.

What Does the Painting Tell You?

❑ **Ask your students what is taking place; suggest a key theme that students can explore.**

When students see this painting after examining *Westward the Star of Empire*, they will be inclined to see it as a more positive representation of Native American cultures. The purpose of showing King's painting, however, is to reveal how ultimately it *also* stereotypes its subject, in this instance not as barbarian but as noble.

King's painting contrasts with Kaufmann's in many important respects. Although we cannot see their whole bodies, we know that the five Native Americans are not slinking around but standing up. They are shown not emerging from the darkness but in an even light. They wear elaborate and carefully detailed clothing and jewelry, and War Eagle (the figure closest to the viewer) displays but does not threaten to use his two weapons. Around his neck War Eagle wears a Peace Medal bearing the likeness of James Monroe, fifth president of the United States. Such a medal would have been given to him by a white dignitary as a sign of cooperation between races. Only in the snake drawn on the temple of the Pawnee second from right is there a distinct relationship between the paintings of King and Kaufmann.

KEY THEMES

Native Americans as "noble savages" or as the ancient Romans of the nineteenth-century

Yet how flattering really is King's portrait? The Native Americans have noticeably light (almost white) skin. Their features are in many respects like those of European settlers as well. (Note for example the figure at far right.) More specifically, King relates his group of Native Americans not only to whites in general but to a certain archetype: the ancient Roman. War Eagle and the others wear distinctly togalike buffalo robes. The Pawnee second from right stands in direct profile, displaying what might be called his "Roman nose" for the viewer.

What the Painting Does Not Tell You

❑ **Share this information with your students.**

King's portrait represents Native Americans as noble and powerful. Yet by 1821, when a delegation of Pawnee visited King's studio in Washington, D.C., and became the subject of this painting, actual Native American cultures had been ruthlessly repressed by the national and various local authorities. The chief Tecumseh, for instance, had led an uprising that resulted in his death and the subjugation of his people.

King's painting contains hints that, no matter how powerful they may appear, these Native Americans are in fact under white control. Consider the following:

1. None of them looks at the viewer. We see them but they avert their eyes and thus do not confront the viewer eye-to-eye.
2. They are cramped or jammed within the picture, almost like beasts in a cage. (Remember how Kaufmann's painting linked Native Americans to wild animals.)
3. Although they are portrayed as a *group* or tribe of five, none of King's figures looks at the others. They are separate beings. The beads around War Eagle's neck (and the other beads in the picture) tell us about the power of unity and organization: how separate things can come together to form a strong and valuable whole. King's five Indians, each staring in a slightly different direction, do not possess this kind of organizational unity.
4. The spear pointing at War Eagle's throat none too subtly indicates the threat of violence and subjugation he must face.

Why Was It Painted This Way?

❑ **Discuss possible reasons with your students.**

King and others developed the noble savage theme as a way of emphasizing what they perceived as the dignity of Indian cultures. Contrasted to European culture, which many intellectuals considered "over-civilized," Indian cultures allegedly existed in a primitive and natural state, close to the earth and unaffected by the highly controlled and structured world of "civilization." They offered an example to all those who would go "back to nature" to live simply, honorably, nobly.

Yet such a belief grossly simplified actual Indian cultures. The noble savage label was as damaging as the motifs of subhumanity in Kaufmann's painting, for it characterized Indian cultures as simple, without sophistication, offering an appealing contrast to civilization but never "civilized" themselves. King's Indians may not slither in the grass but they are represented as literally "lower" or more primitive than those who are "civilized."

This state of noble savagery did not reflect actual Indian cultures. Instead, as in King's painting, Indians were shown not as themselves but as an image of what American settlers could be, if unencumbered by the strictures of civilization.

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

1. THE STEREOTYPE IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE: DISCUSSION

Discuss the questions: What is a stereotype? How are stereotypes created? Why?

2. THE STEREOTYPE IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE: ACTIVITIES

Using an image from contemporary culture, explain to students the various ways in which an image might stereotype its subject. Then, as a homework assignment, ask students to look through newspapers and magazines—or sources more closely related to the school itself, such as yearbooks or the student newspaper—to find a photograph that they believe stereotypes a certain figure or figures. Then have them write a brief analysis of how the images stereotype their subject matter. Students' analyses may then be presented in class.

MINING FOR GOLD

Goals

1. To see how images created an optimistic view of what was often a brutal and unprofitable business: the mining of gold

2. To show, by contrasting works of art, that not all images idealize laborers in this way

Charles Christian Nahl and Frederick A. Wenderoth
Miners in the Sierras
circa 1851-52
oil on canvas
54 1/4 x 67 in.

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What Do You See?

❑ **Ask students to describe the painting as fully as possible.**

Four figures, variously wearing red, white, or blue shirts, engage in different actions. One hacks at the earth with a pick-axe. Another (bearing an anchor tattoo on his right forearm) places dirt in a wooden receptacle. Another throws dirt into the receptacle. Another pauses from his work to take a drink of water from a bucket. Behind the figures is a cabin with smoke rising from its chimney. Laundry hangs in front of the cabin. The laundry matches the red, white, and blue colors of the miners' clothes. Wooden steps lead from the cabin down to the streambed. A rocky area overhangs the stream at right. Sunflowers are at both lower edges of the painting. It is a sunny day.

What Does the Painting Tell You?

❑ **Ask students what the figures are doing; then suggest a key theme that students can explore.**

Miners in the Sierras represents four miners operating a mine: they have constructed a wooden receptacle into which they place their shovels of dirt; the water flowing through the receptacle washes away the lighter dirt but leaves deposits of gold trapped on the bottom.

KEY THEME

Gold mining as a peaceful, profitable exercise

The painting represents mining as a peaceful activity. The sun shines and sunflowers bloom: nature is benevolent and will yield its riches to those who work hard to uncover them. In providing wood for the fire in the cabin's fireplace, as well as the water one miner drinks, the natural world nourishes those who would remove its gold. The painting's perfectly X-shaped composition suggests that the natural world is a fundamentally stable and organized place.

Mining itself is represented as a smooth, rhythmic process. The four miners proceed through four distinct steps of mining. The first chips away the earth with his pick-axe. The second loads the earth onto the placer. The third sifts for gold. The fourth pauses to drink water. To call this process a matter of distinct stages or "steps" is particularly appropriate here. The steps leading from the cabin to the stream are echoed in the "steps" (for instance that at far left) by which the stream's water level is gradually lowered, and by the "steps" of the mining process itself. Everything about mining in Nahl and Wenderoth's painting is smooth and easy, as simple as the "step-by-step" walk from the cabin to the placer mine.

The miners are physically powerful. The anchor tattoo on one miner's forearm perhaps suggests that he is indeed "anchored" to the earth—that he cannot be moved from his claim.

The miner holding the bucket of water to his mouth requires considerable strength to do so. The shape and angle of the bucket exactly match the shape and angle of the rocky promontory on the right side of the painting. This relationship suggests that the powerful miner can indeed "lift mountains" in his quest for gold—and in fact he and his fellows have done, and are doing, exactly that in the action of the painting.

The conspicuous red, white, and blue colors of the miners' clothing suggest that they represent not only four people but a nation unified in its quest for gold.

What the Painting Does Not Tell You

❑ **Share this information with your students.**

Despite Nahl and Wenderoth's benevolent portrayal, the actual process of gold mining was anything but pleasant—or profitable. Gold was first discovered at Sutter's Mill, near Sacramento, California, in January 1848. By 1850, approximately eighty thousand people had journeyed west to California in search of fortune. The first miners extracted the surface deposits relatively easily. Subsequently special equipment was needed to extract the deeper, less accessible deposits. Gold digging thus quickly became the province of large companies rather than individual miners such as the ones shown in Nahl and Wenderoth's painting.

George H. Johnson
Mining on the American River, Near Sacramento
circa 1851

A photograph of a mining operation near Sacramento, dating from the same year as *Mining in the Sierras*, shows several sides to mining that Nahl and Wenderoth did not portray.

In the photograph, mining is far from the peaceful hands-on enterprise of a few isolated men; instead it involves dozens of workers and a variety of machinery.

The damage to the environment is more apparent in Johnson's photograph. The rocky foreground is most likely the uncovered riverbed (the dammed river is at upper left). In place of the barely noticeable diversion of the stream in Nahl and Wenderoth's painting, the photograph indicates the large scale on which the natural world could be altered and damaged by mining.

Even so, the photograph is (like the painting) a positive representation of mining. The work force is orderly and the operation is successful: the two figures at lower right hold between them a pan containing some of the mine's gold.

Unidentified Photographer
William McKnight
1851

For many miners digging for gold produced neither wealth nor happiness. William McKnight, who came to California in 1851 to search for gold, wrote to his mother from a mining camp:

Los Angeles
July 11, 1852

My Dear Mother

I write to you in great pain being unable to sit up for more than a few minutes at a time; this is the only letter I have written to St. Louis since I arrived here, I have always waited to get better but have grown worse every day....

July 18, 1852

I am now five hundred miles away from my wife and not a person about me who would do any thing without pay—The mail is about to close and I must bid Farewell *perhaps forever.* I can't say any more[. . .] Farewell—God bless you is the prayer of your dying Son

William

McKnight, who died three weeks later at the age of thirty-five, was only one of many miners who succumbed to disease in the unsanitary mining camps. Still others never even made it to California. Going west around 1850 meant either going overland across the Great Plains, a largely unknown and inhospitable area at that time; sailing from the eastern United States all the way around Cape Horn (the southern tip of South America) and then back up to California; or sailing to Panama and making the treacherous trip across the malaria-infested jungle in order to resume the ocean voyage on the other side. (The anchor on the miner's arm in Nahl and Wenderoth's painting might well indicate that this man has come to California by sea.)

Although Nahl and Wenderoth's painting shows four white miners, in fact many of those who worked on the mines were Mexican, Chinese, or of African descent. This same point may be made about other kinds of western images as well. For example, many of the cowboys and cavalrymen in the West were black, but paintings of cowboys and cavalrymen rarely include anyone who is not white. If we are to believe the paintings of Nahl and Wenderoth and others, the nineteenth-century American West was a racially homogeneous place—everyone was white, except for Native Americans; in fact, the West's large population of minorities made it racially and culturally diverse.

An added irony to *Miners in the Sierras*: Nahl himself had sailed for California with the idea of striking it rich. He was tricked into purchasing a claim that contained virtually no gold. For six months he and his family survived by selling food to other miners. He then abandoned mining and began his career as a painter.

Why Was It Painted This Way?

❑ **Discuss possible reasons with your students.**

Even though Nahl himself had experienced the hardships of a miner's life, he and Wenderoth portrayed gold digging as a noble activity. They did so in part to satisfy the demands of a wealthy man who commissioned the painting, August Heilbron of Sacramento. For prominent Californians like Heilbron, gold mining was a rich and vital part of the state's cultural identity. Such men wanted only favorable, Romantic images of mining such as the one Nahl and Wenderoth provided.

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

1. CLASS DISCUSSION: IDEALIZATION

Joseph Stella
Miners
circa 1908
charcoal
37 x 19 1/8 in.

We already know that Nahl and Wenderoth's painting is an idealization of mining. How does the following image—Joseph Stella's *Miners—not* idealize its subject, which is two coal miners from near Pittsburgh? Ask students how it contrasts with *Miners in the Sierras.*

In Stella's drawing:

1. The miners are old and fatigued. They have sunken eyes and furrowed brows. The lower lip of the left miner droops as if from exhaustion. The shape of the lip is matched by the droopy line of the other miner's hat.
2. The miners are not unified as they were in Nahl and Wenderoth's painting. Instead they are shown as isolated beings, seemingly unaware of each other's presence, much like the five Pawnee in Charles Bird King's *Young Omahaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and Pawnees.*
3. Mining is linked not to brilliant sunlight but to pitch blackness.
4. The artist uses charcoal rather than colorful paints. The charcoal relates to the coal that miners extract from the earth and its dust appears to choke them, just as the coal dust would have.

To idealize or not to idealize? Which is more appropriate to the depiction of people at work today?

Arguments could be made both ways.

Nahl and Wenderoth's painting represents workers as powerful, even heroic people laboring together in a benevolent natural environment for their own financial benefit—the gold they mine is theirs.

Stella's drawing represents workers as exploited and tragic figures, beaten and exhausted, with no indication that what they will own or even want what they mine.

2. IDEALIZATION VERSUS "REALISM": OTHER PROFESSIONS

Ask students to identify other jobs that can be idealized and to explain how and why these jobs are represented in such favorable ways. Contrast such idealized images with "realistic" images.

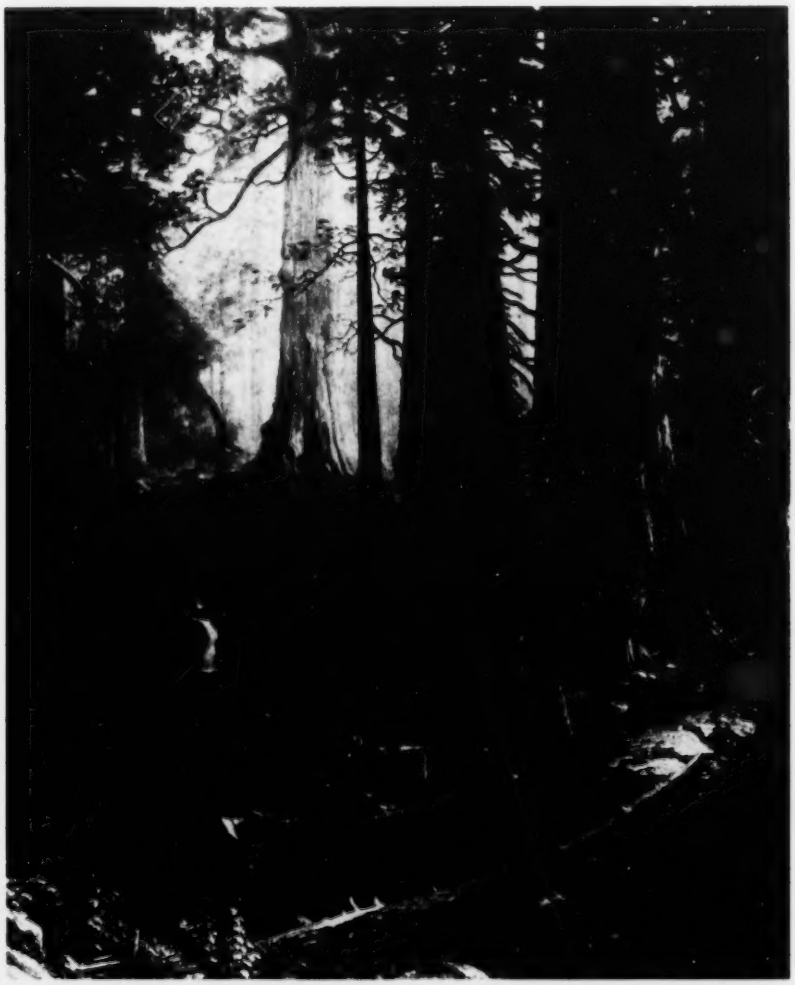
Lesson 4

THE WESTERN ENVIRONMENT

Goals

1. To show how the pristine natural scenes we find in nineteenth-century landscape paintings do not always correspond to the actual appearance of the land at that time

2. To contrast nineteenth-century images of nature with contemporary images of nature, such as those found in postcards, magazine advertisements, and displays in zoos and natural history museums



Albert Bierstadt
Giant Redwood Trees of California
1874
oil on canvas
52 1/2 x 43 in.

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What Do You See?

❑ **Ask students to describe the painting as fully as possible.**

Bierstadt's painting shows a stand of giant trees. Native Americans wander among the trees. There is a camp in the cavelike hollow of the tree at right. To the left is a pond with a stream flowing into it in the middle distance and out of it in the foreground.

What Does the Painting Tell You?

❑ **Suggest key themes that students can explore.**

The giant trees—redwoods—are part of a primeval forest. Even where the redwoods and other trees are leaning as if near death (distant left), they have fallen or will fall on their own, of natural causes, rather than as the result of axes and saws.

Bierstadt's painting depicts nature as a hospitable and inviting presence, harmonized with the world of human beings. Not only do the Native Americans live simply, peacefully and literally under nature's protection in this world, but we as viewers may interact with nature in a similarly pleasant, harmonious way.

The fallen tree at lower right acts as an imaginative entry into the painting. It is a "bridge" across the stream and between our world and the world of the painting. It allows us imaginatively to step from our space into the space of the painting.

Once across the bridge, our movement through the painting is just as easy. The three largest trees stand in a perfect diagonal row that encourages us to "move back" into the picture and perhaps rest—and "rest" our eye—on the third and most brightly illuminated of these trees.

KEY THEMES

1. Nature as an untouched paradise
2. Nature as an easily accessible place; we may experience nature without harm either to it or ourselves

From this point, another fallen tree bridges the stream in the distance, allowing us to cross another body of water and eventually return to our starting point.

Water flows into the pool in the middle distance and then flows out of the pool in the foreground, creating a movement from far to near within the painting. This movement effectively "shows us the way" from the middle distance back to where we began.

If we imagine our easy path through the painting, we see that we have taken a roughly oval-shaped route around the forest. This oval shape is reinforced by the painting's composition. The oval begins with the fallen tree in the foreground, extends to the bending tree on the right edge of the painting, continues with the hanging branches of this tree and the most distant redwood, and then ends with the inward-pointing curves of the tree on the painting's left.

What the Painting Does Not Tell You

❑ **Share this information with your students.**

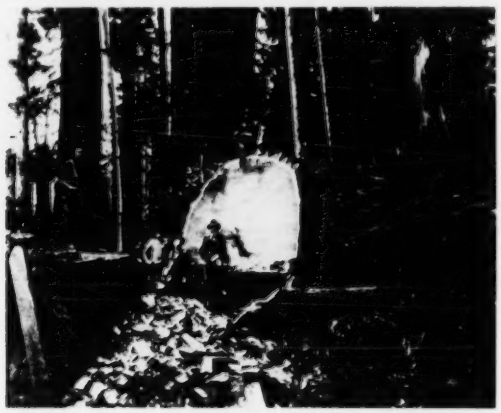
In 1852 a man on a hunting trip in California shot and wounded a bear. Following the bear into unfamiliar territory, he found himself standing under the biggest trees he had ever seen. When he returned to his camp, his fellow hunters did not believe his

incredible story about the big trees. A few days later, however, he persuaded the other hunters to follow him to where he had tracked the bear, and there—with the big trees towering over them—they readily acknowledged that he had told the truth.

One of those attracted to the big trees was the artist Albert Bierstadt, who saw photographs of the redwoods in New York and decided to journey to California to see and depict them in paint.

Yet by 1874, when Bierstadt made his painting, the redwood forests were far from the pristine areas they had been only twenty-two years earlier. The redwoods were frequented by tourists and lumber companies alike. Hotels were established to accomodate the throngs of visitors who wished to see the giant trees.

Charles Curtis
Dismantling of the General Noble Redwood Tree
1892
albumen print



A.W. Ericson
Twelve-foot Saw for a Twelve-day Job
1892-93
photograph

The great size of the redwoods forced the logging industry to develop new saws and log-moving devices. Despite the weeks it could take to chop just one of the redwoods down, the logging industry succeeded in turning many of the ancient trees into various wood products.

Bierstadt's painting is a fictional portrayal not only of the people "living with" the redwoods—for by 1874 these people were tourists and not Indians—but also of the pristine condition of the giant trees, for by this time many of them had been cut down.

Why Was It Painted This Way?

❑ **Discuss possible reasons with your students.**

Bierstadt represented the redwood forest as an untouched paradise in order to glorify America. Then thought to be the oldest living things on earth, the redwoods testified to the great antiquity of the American land—the existence of this land as an unblemished "pure" place untouched by the corruptions of civilization. Where trees did die in Bierstadt's view of America as Eden, they did so from natural causes rather than as a result of the woodsman's saw. In addition, the great size of the redwoods also suggested the mightiness of the American nation. Bierstadt's painting and other images of the redwoods advertised the scenic wonders of California, encouraging tourists to take their vacations there. Showing the trees cut down by the very Americans they were supposed to glorify would suggest that America was not such a "pure" place after all.

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

COMMEMORATING NATURE TODAY

In the nineteenth century, painting was an important form for commemorating nature. Today, however, painting has largely been replaced by other kinds of commemoration. We see nature often through postcards, zoos, and natural history museum dioramas. In the activities listed below, students will be asked to investigate some of the ironies of contemporary images of nature.

1. ***Postcards or Magazine Advertisements*** Ask students to select a postcard or other "nature" image and analyze how it presents a certain viewpoint about the natural world. Students might be asked to discuss:
   - why an image does or does not include a human presence;
   - why it shows a sweeping panoramic view or a minute close-up (on seashells, for example);
   - why it includes writing ("Florida" or "Dolphin," or "Visit Colorado," for example) and how this writing affects the scene;
   - what sort of viewer it implies: someone in peaceful or thoughtful interaction with nature, or otherwise;
   - how, in the manner of Bierstadt's painting, it allows a viewer to travel imaginatively throughout the image.
2. ***Creating a Collage*** Ask students to arrange, on one sheet of paper, one image of unspoiled nature with another, contrasting view of damage to nature—perhaps of pollution in the skies or litter on the ground.

   The point of the exercise is for students to contrast the message of one image with another—to change or make ironic the meaning of an unspoiled nature image with another, less flattering image. These compare and contrast works of art—each containing two images affixed to an 8" x 11" piece of paper—could be traded among students, with the recipient of each collage being required to write a brief interpretation of the collage received.
3. ***Theme Parks and Zoos*** Students could be asked the following question: As images of nature, how do each of these places differ from the actual natural world itself? How for example does visiting a zoo differ from actually being out in the wild? How might a trip to a safari park, in which one rides in a car, also differ from nature?
4. ***Dioramas*** Again students could be asked: How does a diorama differ from nature? Is its relationship to nature any more direct than that in a painting? If the animals in dioramas were in fact once alive, how paradoxical is it that they have been killed and mounted in order to preserve them for museum visitors? In a crowded natural history museum, does a diorama ask us to block out what is going on around us—the noise of other visitors, the flashing and clicking of cameras—in order to believe that what we are seeing is actually the natural world? Students might be asked to visit a local natural history museum and write a brief analysis of one diorama, listing all the ways in which it differs from nature itself.

HOW HISTORY IS MADE: THE VIEW FROM THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

Goals

To enable students to understand how history is made, or imagined, by an artist with the help of his/her model—how it does not necessarily reflect actual events but is instead the result of the artist's imaginative construction of events

Henry Farny
Ogallala Fire
circa 1902
oil on canvas
12 x 16 in.

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What Do You See?

❑ **Ask students to describe the painting as fully as possible.**

Like King's portrait of *Young Omahaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and Pawnees*, Farny's painting shows the subject from the chest up. The man wears a fur hat. His face is daubed with war paint. He looks out at the viewer.

What Does the Painting Tell You?

In this section the feature image will not be analyzed in detail.

What the Painting Does Not Tell You

❑ **Share this information with your students.**

Henry Farny painted and drew images of western subjects, particularly Indians, from 1881 until his death in 1916. In his own time and today, Farny's paintings have been considered realistic images of the life of Plains and Southwest Indians. One such image is the painting in question, *Ogallala Fire*.

Instead of painting Indians where they lived, however, Farny made most of his paintings in his studio in Cincinnati, Ohio. He did travel west, but most of his knowledge of Native American cultures was gleaned from books, images, and his collection of tribal artifacts. The model for many of his Indian images, including *Ogallala Fire*, was the janitor of the Cincinnati Art Club, of which Farny was a member. "The hand that erstwhile wielded the tomahawk and scalping knife," Farny wrote, "now handles the broom and dustpan."

Why Was It Painted This Way?

❑ **Discuss possible reasons with your students.**

Because his subject was a janitor, Farny had to *imagine* him as the warrior we see in the finished painting. All evidence of Ogallala Fire's real position—his handling of "the broom and dustpan"—had to be eliminated. Otherwise the model and the painting would seem posed and consequently not very "real."

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

1. HOW A WORK OF ART IS CREATED: GOING BEHIND THE SCENES

Students should be divided into several small groups. Each group will examine two images—one of a final western painting and another of the artist's model posing for one of the figures. The students will work with two photographs:

Charles Schreyvogel
(SHRY-vogel)
Defending the Stockade
circa 1905
oil on canvas
28 x 36 in.

Unidentified
Photographer
Schreyvogel and Model on Rooftop in Hoboken, New Jersey
1902

On the basis of the two images, each group will be asked to write a short play or story concerning the making of the painting. Ideally, these plays or stories will reveal an ironic difference between the finished painting and how it was made—similar to the difference between Farny's painted warrior and the actual janitor who posed for the painting. In developing their plays or stories, students should not be limited to facts but should use their imaginations to make a fictional account of events. Some of the questions that a play or story might address:

- Who is the model? Does he live down the street from the artist? How did he get a chance to work for the artist? Does he have another job besides modeling? Does he like what he's doing? Is he posing for all of the figures in the painting? Does he resent having to change from his soldier's costume into his Native American's costume and then back again?
- How do the artist and model interact? Do they get along? Do they see eye-to-eye about the length and pay involved in posing?
- How worried is the artist about excluding all references to his studio in the final painting?

In short, students should not worry about telling the story of the final painting but more about the behind-the-scenes story of the painting's making. Ideally, the irony of Farny's situation— using a janitor in downtown Cincinnati as the model for his mighty Sioux warrior—should come across in the students' plays or stories about Schreyvogel's picture-making.

The exercise works best as a comparison, with both images on view at once while the students develop their plays or stories.

The plays or stories can then be acted out or discussed in class.

In working on their projects, each group is free to develop its own plots. The facts about the career of Charles Schreyvogel are not necessarily important to the development of the students' stories. Yet a few biographical details may be useful to pass along to them:

> Schreyvogel lived and worked in Hoboken, New Jersey, from around 1900 to 1912. He often painted his subjects on the rooftop of his apartment building. One of his favorite models was a local prep school football star. Another model was a neighborhood handyman.

The exercise is designed to underscore the radical difference between the subject of a work of art and the circumstances of its creation—the difference between the Great Plains and a cramped studio in Hoboken, New Jersey. From this difference students can understand western paintings, not as fact but as myth.

2. CLASS DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION: WHAT IS MYTH?

Myths are traditional stories told to make sense of the world. Every culture has its myths. For example, the Greeks and Romans accounted for all natural phenomena according to myths.

In the United States, one of our most important myths is that of the Wild West. This myth has helped to define the country's values. An intrepid exploratory spirit (Columbus and the pioneers); a sense of self-sacrifice (Isabella giving up her jewels); pride and defiance (War Eagle, Young Omahaw, and the Pawnees); harmonious community (the goldminers); veneration for a spectacular natural environment (the redwoods); heroic individualism (cowboys, soldiers, warriors fighting each other and the natural world)—each of these themes has come to represent American values.

Yet. . .

- if Isabella did not sell her jewels to finance Columbus's voyage;
- if the typical pioneer family making the trek westward did not so perfectly resemble the Holy Family;
- if Native Americans were neither subhuman nor linked to ancient Rome;
- if digging for gold was often more a matter of lost fortune—and all-around misfortune—than of sunny, peaceful days;
- and if Ogallala Fire—and other artists' models—were not exactly the warriors and cowboys they appear to be in finished paintings, then are these paintings "bad" or "wrong?"

Have they told a biased story masquerading as fact, concealing realities with glorious—and misleading—scenes? If these scenes are misleading, should it be revealed that the myth itself is based on events that never took place and that, consequently, the country's "national values" may have no foundation in fact?

Or has the myth created by these paintings and other images been essentially positive—a heroic story that has inspired more good than it has bad?

GLOSSARY

civilization	An advanced stage of development in the arts and sciences accompanied by corresponding political, social, and cultural advancement. The total culture of a people, nation, or period in history.
contemporary	Belonging to the same period of time; modern, current.
frontier	That part of a country that borders another country; an unsettled region.
hero/heroine	A man or woman admired for courage, fortitude, prowess, nobility.
idealize	To regard something in its absolute perfection; a person or thing considered to be a standard of excellence and worthy of imitation.
Indian	The name mistakenly given to Native Americans Columbus encountered when he "discovered" the "New World," believing he had reached the East Indies.
legend	A widely accepted but unverified story.
Manifest Destiny	This term was taken from a quote by a New York newspaperman, John L. O'Sullivan who wrote, while complaining about other countries interfering with the annexation of Texas, that it was "our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole continent which Providence has given us for the development of (our yearly multiplying millions) the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.
migration	The movement from one place to another as in the movement of people leaving the East to resettle in the West.
motif	A recurrent thematic element in an artistic or literary work. A dominant theme.

myth	A legendary story or fable; a fictional thing or event that expresses or explains basic truths.
pioneer	One who goes ahead; to do or be first. An early settler.
stereotype	A person, group, event or issue that is thought to typify or conform to an unwavering pattern or manner, lacking any individuality.
symbol	An object standing for or representing something else.
theme	An idea, point of view, or perception embodied and expanded upon in a work of art; a topic for discussions.

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